

“No, it’s not your skills being more effective. I told you, I can disable my resistances,” Ilea said, rolling her eyes at the smirking elf.

“Oh of course,” Feyrair said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Next thing you tell me, you can absorb mana from my spells.”

Ilea’s left eye twitched. “Another bout?”

“Oh? No I don’t think that’s necessary. I wouldn’t want to hurt you too badly,” he said.

Ben caught up to her and touched her shoulder. “He has a way to turn around any situation. Do not let it get to you.”

*If only my Mental Resistance would profit from his shit, she thought with a smile.*

The few bouts they did have, she had to admit weren’t quite as one sided as their first. Well in the end they turned out the same but each time, the elf could hold his ground a little longer. His first defeat let him get over his aggressive pride, now staying on the defensive all the time. At one point he even tried to flee, just for a chance to recover. Downright blasphemous really.

*How dare he do what I would.*

It wouldn’t have been a problem if he didn’t heal as fast as he did. He wasn’t quite as insane as Ilea but coupled with his high defense and growing ash resistance, it was definitely annoying.

The parallels to her own fighting style weren’t lost on her either. If anything it was more annoying.

At least they were getting close to the northern dungeon. Ilea hoped Elfie’s group hadn’t somehow fucked up and destroyed or disconnected the gate. *Well in that case I can just leave them all behind.*

The thought soothed her and the journey would soon end, allowing her to punch dwarven machines.

She checked through the few messages from her training when they finally arrived.

**‘ding’ ‘Sentinel Huntress reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 25’**

**‘ding’ ‘Deviant of Humanity reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18’**

**‘ding’ ‘Heat Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 8’**

**‘ding’ ‘Heat Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 9’**

**‘ding’ ‘Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4’**

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**‘ding’ ‘Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 9’**

*Another five levels, she thought and entered the dungeon.*

The group of elves followed her as she led them through the corridors and into the Centurion facility.

“Always a sight,” Feyrair said when they flew out into the large open space between the many layers of the manufacturing plant. “We should collapse it all,” the elf added, summoning flames around him.

“No,” Ilea said. “There are people who could learn from this structure. Plus a friend is still around.”

“Smith,” Seithir spoke, smiling gently.

“Yeah, smith,” Ilea said.

“We are not here for Centurions,” Farthorn said.

Ilea glanced at him as they floated downwards. “The special variants are quite impressive. I doubt your young would have no difficulty against them.”

“But the Hunters here are sufficient to fulfill that task,” Asay said, smiling at her.

“They are,” Ilea replied, the group landing at the bottom of the facility. Singed steel and dents showed where the battles had taken place, shrapnel and piles of burnt steel littering the area.

She followed her mark into one of the corridors, the group coming into a large hall where four elves circled a single remaining Centurion.

Feyrair vanished instantly, tackling the special variant with white flames bursting forth.

The thing was destroyed in seconds, Elfie and his group retreating as the new elf basked in the Centurion explosion.

Ilea watched the elf as he turned towards her, brushing off the soot as he grinned.

*Trying to impress me?* she thought, rolling her eyes at the display.

Asay snickered to himself as he glanced at her. “You’re not actually interested in him, are you?”

She wondered. “Hey, at least we share a hobby. I’m not looking for a serious relationship anyway.”

“In that case there is no need to mock you into reconsideration,” Asay said, floating past to greet the group of new elves.

Farthorn floated past, his eyes on Ilea.

“Still think I lured you into a trap?” she asked, getting an amused hiss in reply.

“Perhaps I misjudged you, human. Time will tell,” he said.

Elfie made his mask vanish before he bowed in midair. “Niivalyr Olanis, I am honored to meet you.”

“As am I, Cerithil Hunter. It is always good to welcome more into our fight. I am Isalthar, brought here by our human ally. We have much to discuss,” he said.

“Val Akuun,” Neiphato said, bowing deeply.

Ilea felt some discomfort in a few of the elves but Isalthar didn’t seem to mind.

“Where is the gate?” Feyrair asked as he joined them again.

Ilea sat next to the small camp fire, enjoying the warmth and smell of burning wood. Asay and Ben had joined her, the rest discussing the layout of the Centurion facility and everything Elfie's group knew about their target.

She wasn't particularly interested in the specifics, focusing on the many marks in her mind. "What does Val Akuun mean?" she asked after a while.

Ben hissed, gesturing her to be quiet.

"He is afraid, to call him what he is," Asay said with a smirk, his sharp teeth showing as his mouth opened slightly. "Why? Is it not a title of the greatest honor?"

"There is no honor in murder, only necessity," Ben said.

"Who did he kill?" Ilea asked, addressing Asay.

"Who would instill such fear in elves such as us?" Asay asked.

*Oracles?* Ilea thought.

"He killed a lady elf?" she asked.

Asay smiled. "That is how the story goes. I have yet to hear him claim its truth himself, and yet he does not refute the title. One that speaks of the greatest deceit, of cursed wickedness, and yet to others an honor, a call to freedom from domains and whims of ancient Oracles."

"What is it to you?" she asked him.

He remained silent for a moment. "A testament of great loss to life and magic. The hope it may instill in some is not lost on me however. A balance I have yet to settle, on one side or the other," Asay spoke.

"And yet you're here, cursed and hunted," Ilea said.

"Their restrictions are something I can do without, neither can I deny their bright brilliance of magic itself," he spoke, his eyes glazing over lightly as he smiled.

"Overwhelming power, wielded by those blind for change and the very protection of their children," Ben hissed.

Asay raised his hands. "Why should those who stand above, concern themselves with matters of their lessers? Is it not enough a gift for them to bring us life?"

Ben just hissed again and murmured something in his elven dialect.

"So your domains are just governed by the most powerful Oracles and males?" Ilea asked.

"Not quite. Oracles hardly ever concern themselves with... let us say, practical questions. Their whims and wishes are often confusing to those who cannot understand their ways. The rulers... in a sense that you, a human, would perhaps comprehend, are those we call Monarchs. The one most powerful in each domain. They too follow the word of the Oracles but as their concerns are rarely overlapping, each rule in their own way.

"For were it not for the sanctuary of the Places of Creation, any elf that dares defy them, would've long met their end," Asay said.

"Dungeons, right?" Ilea asked. "Why the rule against disturbing them?"

“Dungeons, yes. It has to do with mana density but more so with the birth of creatures you call monsters,” Asay spoke. “You may deem them pests but Oracles, and not few males of our kind, think differently on these sacred caverns,” he said and gestured around himself.

“So they don’t kill monsters?” Ilea asked. *Could just lure some high level beast into their domains,* she thought, liking the idea.

Asay laughed. “No, of course they do. Sacred thoughts are often bent or forgotten when one’s own is threatened, would you not agree?”

“How very human of you,” Ilea said with a smile.

“Human, Dwarf, Elf, Orc, Mava, Druned, and even Vampires... relishing is the freeing thought that we are all prone to hypocrisy. Is it not?” he asked and laughed delightfully.

“Creatures themselves are not deemed sacred once they leave a dungeon,” Ben chimed in.

Asay waved him off. “And yet it makes little sense. Is it not the life that is deemed sacred?”

“Life can flourish without endangering our young. I wouldn’t care if the Taleen machines just dwelled in their forgotten ruins and facilities,” Ben replied.

“And yet they do not,” Asay said with a slight shrug.

“What can you tell me about the other races you mentioned? I’ve only ever met a dwarf, you guys, and a few other species but none of those you mentioned,” Ilea said. She had met a Vampire but that guy wasn’t exactly up for a conversation.

“I have little interest in these matters, more so in what they can create,” Asay said.

“They generally live in territories farther west and north of even the domains,” Ben said. “Your history has little regard for them, likely due to the barriers presented by our kind and the north itself.”

“Enlighten me then, the others are still discussing who should enter first,” she said and rolled her eyes. “Start with the domains.”

Ben smiled. “Very well. The Navali forest stretches east past the Karthian gulf, a small part only of the ancient green. Most of the forest is to the west. The closest domain to Karth is probably that of the Deep. Elves who dwell in the depths of the ocean. I haven’t heard of any participating in the war, neither attacking Taleen, humans, or other Elves. But it’s generally advised not to enter the sea, even close to Karth,” he said.

“Water elves? Do they have gills?” Ilea asked and gestured. “And little lights growing from their foreheads?”

“I haven’t met any. Perhaps that’s how they look,” Ben said.

*Just adds more fuckery to the ocean. Haven’t seen any near my house at least,* Ilea thought. *Then again it’s quite far from Karth.*

“The Elves you are likely most familiar with come from the Wastes of Ash, the domain of fire. The name aptly describes their territory bordering the north facing Naraza mountain chain far west of Karth and any human settlement. They’re a society of fighters, and generally the main combatants fighting Taleen armies,” he explained.

“The ones who came into the plains?” Ilea asked.

“Not solely, no. But most you fought are likely from the Wastes, yes,” Ben said. “The wastes border the northernmost part of the Navali forest. West of the forest lay the mountains of Vannok. Where both the Sky and Dark domains can be found. Neither are known to interfere more than necessary with the groups around them. But if you manage to draw their ire, you won’t be able to find a place remote enough to hide.”

“Sky and Dark. Very original,” Ilea commented.

Ben didn’t seem to mind. “The Singing Castle, Verleyrna, flies far above the Vannok mountains. The Elves of its domain often winged. Anything that enters their territory without reason or permission is hunted down without mercy. The mountains below and their endless caverns belong to the Dark. I believe there is some truce between those two domains, otherwise there would have to be an open war.”

“What dwells in the darkness is no concern to those who fly above,” Asay said.

“Maybe,” Ben replied. “It’s hard to say how far the Taleen have reached but I wouldn’t be surprised if the caverns are littered with destroyed machines. It’s a high risk to venture into these territories, even for a group like us.”

“Should the domain of Dark fall, would spell the beginning of the end,” Asay supplied.

Ben hissed. “I wouldn’t go that far. And no domain has fallen in thousands of years.”

“It is merely a simple calculation,” Asay said. “Once the scales tip in favor of the unrelenting, little will remain in their way.” He giggled at the thought, his hands moving to represent the scales.

“Is your magic derived from the domains you’re from?” Ilea asked. “Which would mean Ben, you’re from an Ice domain and Feyrair is from the Wastes?”

“Mostly,” he replied. “But while we’re born with certain magic and strong affinities, we too have the capability to evolve and change. Asay here is a good example. Pure arcane is not often seen in elves. His status as an exile wouldn’t be a surprise to many.”

“Restrictions,” Asay said and smirked.

“North of Vannok and west of the Wastes lies the Still Valley, domain of frost and ice. I was born there,” Ben said.

Ilea waited for him to elaborate but he just moved on to the next. *Difficult topic?*

“Lastly, there is the domain of Light, in the desert south of the Vannok mountains and the Navali forest. They mostly remain in their desert, the harsh conditions dissuading any enemies that would try and seek them out, not that anybody would succeed without their consent,” he explained.

Ilea nodded, taking a few notes in her notebook as she processed the new information. “Bunch of hermits in different climates. Gotcha.”

“Humans may not be quite as prevalent in the east if we weren’t so concerned with ourselves,” Ben said.

“And yet here we are,” Ilea said with a bright smile.

Asay smirked. “You would do well not to underestimate those you study so dearly,” he said and smiled towards Ben. “Though the monarchs may believe the species of this world live and die at their whims, the balance is not quite as stark. Magic flows through all of us.”

Ilea smiled at him. The elves may have four marks in their ranks but if she could reach her power in just a few years, she wondered what kind of monsters slumbered in the human lands, unconcerned with wars and monsters until a real threat forces them to action.

“Do you think there are hidden human actors who could oppose the domains?” she asked outright. “The orders and rulers I have met would hardly be enough to stop even the group that gathered here.”

Asay smirked, purple light flashing in his eyes. “I do wonder,” he said.

“You tease,” Ilea said with a smile. “What about the other species?”

Ben crossed his arms and continued. “Dwarfs in the northern mountains, mostly the Naraza chain but their dwellings are below ground, many of their cities likely never to be found by an outsider. Orcs dwell in the west, far from even the Frozen Wastelands north of the Still Valley. I have never met one but they are said to be warrior tribes, often raiding each other and occasionally those bordering their territories.

“The Cursed Marsh separates the orc lands in the far west and the lands of the Druned and Mava. I know little of those creatures and their origin, few elves are interested in their kind,” Ben said.

“The western part of the Sava desert is not claimed by the domain of Light,” Asay said. “The Mava originate from the dunes and sands. It is unknown to me who came before, us or the Mava. There are animals in the eastern forest that resemble their kind, however I have met few in my time. What were they called, fluffy, red, tailed, and four legged beasts with pointy snouts. They do resemble wolves in a way but seem far more delicate.”

“Foxes?” Ilea asked, immediately thinking of Catelyn. *Is she one of them?*

“Perhaps. But they are larger and masters of magic. If only our kind would not have left such horrible impressions,” Asay mused. “Perhaps I could have studied with their kind.”

“What about the Druned?” Ilea asked.

“Hmm... peculiar creatures. They are golems of stone and rock, building for the Mava, perhaps protected by them, though the intricacies of their cooperation was never shared with me,” Asay said. It was obvious that he was much more interested in the Mava.

“They’re west of the light domain desert?” Ilea asked. *No wonder humans don’t know about them. Well did I even ask? Maybe Dagon has heard of all these species.*

Ilea doubted it however. Even the north was deemed a chaotic territory, the species living there unknown to her until she went herself. If someone had to travel through Elven territory, Elves who very much disliked anybody traveling through their domains, it would make exploration quite challenging. Let alone coming back with that information.

“What about the Vampires?” she asked. *Sparkly or bloody? With elves being the bloody ones, maybe they would go towards the other direction.*

Ben hissed at the mention and Asay snickered.

“You see, human. The Still Valley has long had animosity with the Courts of the far north,” Asay said.

“Another endless war?” Ilea asked.

“There would be one, perhaps, though a victor would likely be decided within a decade or two. It is good for both the Still Valley and the Courts, that there exists a territory between them so hostile, it may be more unpleasant even than these wretched lands we have found ourselves in,” Asay said.

“The Cursed Marsh you mentioned?” Ilea asked.

“Also unpleasant, but no. The Frozen Wastelands. A buffer that may have saved more lives than it has taken, though that is debatable,” Asay explained. “I shall not speak of the Marsh.”

“Neither will I, nor of the Wastelands,” Ben said, his mood souring once more.

*So very old, and yet so sensitive. I guess if you had centuries to fuel your hate and animosity, it's that much more intense. Or they're just being Elves.*

*Whole lot of new stuff. And as far as I understand, that's still all on this continent,* she thought, finishing the rough sketch of the various landmarks and territories they had talked about. “How does that look?”

“Barely passable,” Ben said.

“Atrocious. You should study painting for a few decades before you dare create another such abomination,” Asay spoke, physically reeling back.

“I'm human mate, we don't have centuries to hone a craft like that,” Ilea said and rolled her eyes.

“You do,” Ben said. “Not most, but You do.”

“Yeah but right now I'm more interested in my magic,” Ilea said.

Asay leaned closer again, putting a hand on her notebook to cover the map. “As am I,” he said with a wide smile. “Your arcane aura is fascinating. Would you indulge me in a direct application?”

“Sure, I don't mind hitting you in the face a few times,” Ilea said.